Agency says more study needed of CFAC contaminants

By RYAN MURRAY/Daily Inter Lake | Posted: Friday, April 17, 2015 9:30 pm

During a chaotic Flathead City-County Board of Health meeting Thursday afternoon, representatives from the Environmental Protection Agency said a preliminary screening had found traces of cyanide in several groundwater wells on Columbia Falls Aluminum Co. property.

One of the contaminated wells was near the Aluminum City neighborhood between the plant and the city of Columbia Falls.

Other findings include contaminant traces in sediment in the Flathead River and higher levels in Cedar Creek. Despite these initial findings, the total scope of the plume of contamination as well as actions going forward remain a mystery.

Rob Parker, who works with the EPA out of Denver as a site assessment manager, made clear the initial findings were just a toe-dip into the pool of analysis should the CFAC plant become a Superfund cleanup site.

"There is a need for more investigation," he said. "It was a screening-level investigation where we focused on a few key areas. Not all areas of concern were investigated at this time."

A sampling of five domestic wells revealed traces of cyanide. The levels were below maximum allowable contaminant levels.

The wells are not used for drinking water by either the city of Columbia Falls or the aluminum plant itself, but concerns were still present.

"We had no indication that contaminant was present in [Columbia Falls municipal] wells," Parker said. "The groundwater we analyzed is not being used, but it still is used to evaluate potential contamination. The contaminants or contaminated groundwater could migrate."

The EPA has emergency powers to move in if there is an immediate public health hazard.

The agency has elected not to use these powers, seeing no immediate risk and preferring to work equitably with "past and current" owners of the property (Anaconda Copper Mining Co. in 1955, Atlantic Richfield Co. in 1977, Montana Aluminum Investors Corp. in 1985 and finally Glencore International AG in 1999).

Glencore, the parent company of Columbia Falls Aluminum Co., permanently closed the plant this year. It had been shut down since 2009.

Late last year, Columbia Falls Aluminum Co. broke off cleanup talks with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality.

Mike Cirian, who will become the EPA project remedial site manager should the property be listed as a Superfund site, said the EPA is ready to work with whoever is willing or able.

"If this goes to listing, there will be a much more comprehensive study," said Cirian, who has worked on the W.R. Grace Superfund site in Libby for 10 years.

"We have to find the nature and extent of that plume of contamination," he said.

Confusion and frustration over the role of the state and federal environmental agencies in regards to the plant property hung over the meeting.

Joe Russell, public health officer, tried to clear up communication.

"In the Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act and the Clean Air Act, [the county] has primacy," he said. "We don't see the EPA running through our communities. They have delegated to us that management. The EPA is only here is there is a problem."

The scope of the problem was unclear, but Parker expressed concerns about the contamination that was discovered in fall 2013.

"There is a surface water risk in Cedar Creek. There is some contaminated sediment in the Flathead River," he said. "But the groundwater at the site, which people don't use — I would not drink that water."

The sediment contamination in the river appears to be localized on the riverfront along the aluminum-plant property. The contamination levels in Cedar Creek are above recommended safe drinking levels. Parker said if that water or the groundwater on the site was part of the municipal supply, it would have to be treated before consumption.

The lack of information prompted some harsh questioning Thursday of EPA representatives, with health board members demanding to know why more was not known about the contamination.

"I'm on the health board. I'm not a 'greenie,' I'm not here to clean up the earth," said P. David Myerowitz, a cardiologist and health board member. "I just want to know if the levels are safe. I want to know what the DEQ knows."

EPA tests have found cyanide, fluoride, arsenic, manganese, lead and chromium. The lion's share of this contamination comes from spent potlining material that was dumped from 1955 to 1985. The "pots" in which aluminum metal is extracted from aluminum oxide are lined with carbon, which absorbs heavy metals and eventually fails and is removed.

Russell spoke about the truth of the mining and permitting process, which can be a messy one.

"When you're permitting, you're going to allow some pollution," he said. "What we need to find is where a level is present that is actionable."

On the road to possibly designating Columbia Falls Aluminum a Superfund site, the EPA has a 60-day public comment period that ends June 2.

Parker and Cirian ask the public to submit inquiries and comments to one of several locations, where each will be addressed by the EPA after the period.

The next step after the public comment period would be the Remedial Investigation/Feasibility Study, in which the EPA (or the "potentially responsible parties" under EPA supervision) would determine the nature and extent of the contamination, what strategies might be used for the site and the costs.

Information from the federal and state agencies is available at the ImagineIF Library in Columbia Falls.

***Online**:*

For more information or to comment, go to www2.epa.gov/region8/columbia-falls-aluminum-reduction-plant.

Reporter Ryan Murray may be reached at 758-4436 or by email at rmurray@dailyinterlake.com.